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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the literary success of two novels published in 1955: "The Dollmaker," by Harriette Arnow, and "A Fable," by William Faulkner. Reviews of each book reflect that Arnow's book was judged excellent, while Faulkner's book was considered rough and unpolished. In spite of the reviews, Faulkner received the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award that year, and Arnow never attained academic recognition. Although exclusion from the literary record may reflect judgments of quality, this paper examines two other factors that might be involved. Quotations cited indicate that Faulkner was awarded the Pulitzer Prize as a long overdue tribute for the body of his work, rather than specifically for "A Fable." In addition, Arnow was an unknown writer and her book did not fit into any of the current literary movements of the time. The paper states that there is a tendency on the part of academic specialists to fit authors into movements or groups, and that even good books will be lost in time if there are no compelling reasons for academics to consider them. (MAI)

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Faulkner, Arnow and the 1955 National Book Award

There is in our discipline a common wisdom about time, that somehow, it is the ultimate arbiter of literary value, the final, the most objective judge. This way of talking about time, this assumption that "time will tell," is unfortunate, I think--primarily because it isn't true. That is to say, when we talk about time in this way, what we really mean is history, and few of us would talk this way about history because we know it's made--and remade--by people. The truth of the matter is more easily seen in our inclination to personify time, for to conceive of such an image as the "moving finger writing" when we wish to describe the selecting process of time is to acknowledge, however obliquely, that the process is human. The error lies in our inclination to imagine the finger disembodied and the process objective.

In addition to not being true, this way of talking about time is unfortunate because it encourages more complacency with the written record than the record deserves. And it is this matter of complacency that brings us here today. Why is one writer, one book, lost in time while another becomes part of the record and survives? The explanation common wisdom offers--assuming publication and distribution of both books--is a simple one. It's a matter of quality, the result of carefully considered judgments by generations of specialist readers. (If you've not encountered this complacency and want to, you've only to suggest adding an unusual title to your department's reading list for graduate students. Your colleagues' response will make it quite clear: any book not in the record, they'll say, deserves to be lost; those

already there represent quality.)

Now, often this is true, but it's also true that at least some of the time literary survival is more complex than common wisdom suggests. As an example of this, I ask that you consider the fate of two books--both published in 1954, both by American writers (southerners), both considered for significant literary awards in 1955: Harriette Arnow's novel, The Dollmaker; William Faulkner's novel, A Fable.

Insofar as the judgment of time is concerned, some twenty years after publication, only A Fable survives. The selection process common wisdom takes for granted began, it would seem, shortly after publication in the kind of recognition awarded by literary specialists of the period, for while The Dollmaker brought Arnow the Friends of American Writers' Award and something called the Woman's Home Companion's Silver Distaff Award, A Fable brought Faulkner the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. And, it would seem, the judgment of this first generation of specialist readers has been confirmed by generations of academic literary specialists since, for Arnow is not listed in standard reference works and the PMLA bibliography records only one Arnow entry in twenty years.

Well, what do literary awards and exclusion from the academic record mean? Common wisdom would tell us that the early judgment of specialist readers and the subsequent lack of interest among academics exemplify the good old reliable writing of time's fleshless finger. But there are, in the case of these books, other circumstances as well, circumstances that have little to do with quality but that have affected the record nonetheless. I would like to consider two of these circumstances here. I cite them not because I think them particularly decisive but because they suggest different influences on the development of

the literary record.

Consider first the 1955 awards and the assumption of merit they convey, merit as judged by the first generation of specialist readers. If we retrieve for the record early reviews of both novels, we discover that the question of the superiority of A Fable was at first not so clear, for though it won prestigious awards, The Dollmaker received superior reviews. For example, Orville Prescott in the New York Times insisted: "In a brief space it is impossible to do justice to the distinctive quality and the cumulative impact of 'The Dollmaker'," for "depth and power and stature of this enormous book are rare indeed in modern fiction."[1] Coleman Rosenberger in the New York Herald Tribune called it a novel that created "for the moment a world more real and immediate than the reader's own."[2]

Reviewers of A Fable were not so impressed. Some thought the book "a heroically ambitious failure"; others simply a failure.[3] Malcolm Cowley was more appreciative and concluded that though the book was "likely to stand above other novels of the year like a cathedral, if an imperfect and unfinished one," still, there was "something murky in Faulkner's theology, as at times in his style, and . . . something confused in the lesson of the book."[4] (Incidentally, it's said that Cowley, who was a member of the National Book Award jury that year, argued in Arnow's behalf.)[5] Generally speaking, the most favorable reviewers were academics, for as Charles J. Rolo predicted, the book did provide a "field day for specialists in Faulknerian exegesis."[6]

With such a mixed reception, how is it A Fable won? In 1955, the National Book Award jury explained its choice by saying that in part the book was selected "'for its moments of powerful and profound insight. . . .'"[7] In 1974, John Hohenberg explained the Pulitzer Prize: The decision, he said, was made

by the Advisory Board, which chose to ignore the fiction jury's recommendations. This "was the Board's way of showing its respect for Faulkner's stature as an American novelist and its appreciation, however tardy for the permanence of much of his work . . . . It was regrettable that the Board had to pass up the well-considered selections of younger novelists in order to pay Faulkner its long overdue tribute, but no one ever made any public protest."[8]

There was no public protest, but there was acknowledgment of difficulty. The London Times judged the awards as "more in the nature of American (to rival Swedish) recognition of Mr. Faulkner's recent eminence than of the merit of his lastest book . . .";[9] the New York Times noted: "Even admirers of Faulkner have said they don't like to see the master win with an inferior book . . . . The moving finger writes yet one may continue to dwell on concepts of honor and glory. We are for bad Faulkner (if it is bad, which we do not concede) over good Hariet (sic) Arnow . . .,"[10] and alas the Times misspelled Arnow's name. In the minds of many in 1955, then, recognition of A Fable seemed right because Faulkner's early achievement had not been rewarded. Recognition may have been right, but clearly it was not based on a simple judgment of quality. This, however, is not usually part of the record.

But what of the judgments of later generations of specialist readers? How are we to take the absence of The Dollmaker from the academic record? I believe that the problem is not so much one of rejection after judgment as an absence of judgment. That is to say, in periods of large literary production even good books will be lost in time if there are no compelling reasons for academics to study them. There are of course a fair number of such reasons--ranging from the obvious (authorship by an already established writer, for example) to the accidental--but only rarely are these reasons related to

judgments of quality. Consider, for instance, an accidental reason--the influence of academic literary specialists' work habits.

Though we rarely talk about the effect of our work habits on the fate of books, occasionally this is noticed. For example, when Rolo said that A Fable would provide a field day for those interested in Faulknerian exegesis, what he meant was the book would fit in with the work habits of academic specialists and so was likely to attract academic attention. He was right, not only about the way A Fable was treated but also about the way books in general are treated. That is to say, books that fit our interests, our work habits are likely to attract our attention; books that do not may be ignored. Consider our habit of studying authors and works in terms of literary movements and literary groups. Because we so often organize our research, our areas of specialization, our courses and parts of courses in terms of such categories, it is natural that we look for, more easily see, writers and books that fit our categories. Indeed, for this reason I believe it easier for writers who fit to become part of the record than comparable or even better writers who do not fit.

The academic fate of The Dollmaker may be understood at least partly in light of the absence of a compelling reason that it be studied. Arnow was not an established writer; her book was not associated with any literary movement of the fifties; and she was not identified with a literary group, not even with an appropriate group--southern writers. And it is important to note that her exclusion from this group is again not necessarily the result of a negative judgment of quality. The situation is best understood as a matter of bad luck because inclusion in this group has been haphazard. That is to say, there are different kinds of literary groups: those that represent stylistic or regional

categories, as recognized by outsiders, scholar-critics eager to group writers in systematic and comprehensive ways, and those that grow out of ideology and personal contact, the literary cliques. As Richard Kostalanetz has noted, the designation of southern writers refers to a literary clique and not to a stylistic or regional category.[11] And since, from the limited biographic data available, it would seem that Arnow has had little opportunity for personal contact with this group, I call her exclusion bad luck and not a matter of quality.

My point in all this is simple: though exclusion from the literary record may reflect judgments of quality, it may also reflect a surprising number of other factors as well.

However, to say that exclusion of The Dollmaker from the record reflects not so much a judgment of quality as the book's dropping from sight is not to say that if read the book would have been remembered, nor is it to say that if it had received a prestigious award, things would have been different. Such matters are incalculable. What we can be sure of is that the process of establishing the literary record is best regarded with suspicion and not complacence, something we all know and regularly ignore. Jay B. Hubbel once wrote: "There are not 'definitive' literary histories. The individual historian cannot escape his own limitations. He is handicapped by his personal prejudices and prepossessions, the defects in his training, by his shortcomings in literary taste . . . . the limitations of the generation of scholars to which he belongs." (And we might add, without disrespect, he may also be limited by being so often "he.") "Each new generation," Hubbell concluded, "has a different way of looking at those writers in whom it is interested."[12]

Well, we are a different generation with a different way of looking, and we've only begun.

FOOTNOTES

[1]"Books of the Times," New York Times, 20 April 1954, p. 27, col. 2.

[2]"Book Review Section," New York Herald Tribune

[3]"Books," New Yorker, 30 (28 August 1954), 78.

[4]Faulkner's Powerful New Novel . . .," New York Herald Tribune Review Section (1 August 1954), p. ix.

[5]Elizabeth Janeway, in unpublished letter to Phyllis Franklin, November 26, 1977.

[6]Reader's Choice," Atlantic, 194 (September 1954), 80.

[7]"National Book Award," Library Journal, 80 (1 March 1955), 526-28.

[8]The Pulitzers Prizes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 258-9.

[9]"News from the United States," Times Literary Supplement, (5 August 1955), pp. 258-9.

[10]New York Times (30 January 1955), Sec. 7, p. 8, col. 1.

[11]The End of Intelligent Writing: Literary Politics in America (New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1973), pp. 2-3.

[12]"The South in American Literature," South and Southwest (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1965), p. 69.